What Bastille Day Means to America

Destruction of French Citadel of Tyranny 129 Years Ago Marked Vital Step for World Democracy.

By JOHN WALKER HARRINGTON.

FRANCE on this day 129 years ago, namely, on July 14, 1789, overthrew the world's most notorious citadel of tyranny, and started on her long, hard road to freedom.

Her national holiday, in the celebration of which the Allies, including the United States, are joining, is doubly significant to the American people. Our own troops, fighting gloriously for liberty on the soil of France, won a victory on the natal day of this Republic. The Fourth of July and the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille come so nearly together that they might almost be celebrated on the same date. Circumstances brought them into close relations.

The stirring events which culminated in the taking of France's fortress of feudalism were in motion early in July, 1789, and two great characters in the history of France and the United States were in the French capital at that very time. The Marquis de Lafayette, after consulting with Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, presented to the National Assembly a bill of rights. Had the French acted ten days sooner, as there were many indications that it might, a common birthday might now be observed by the sister nations.

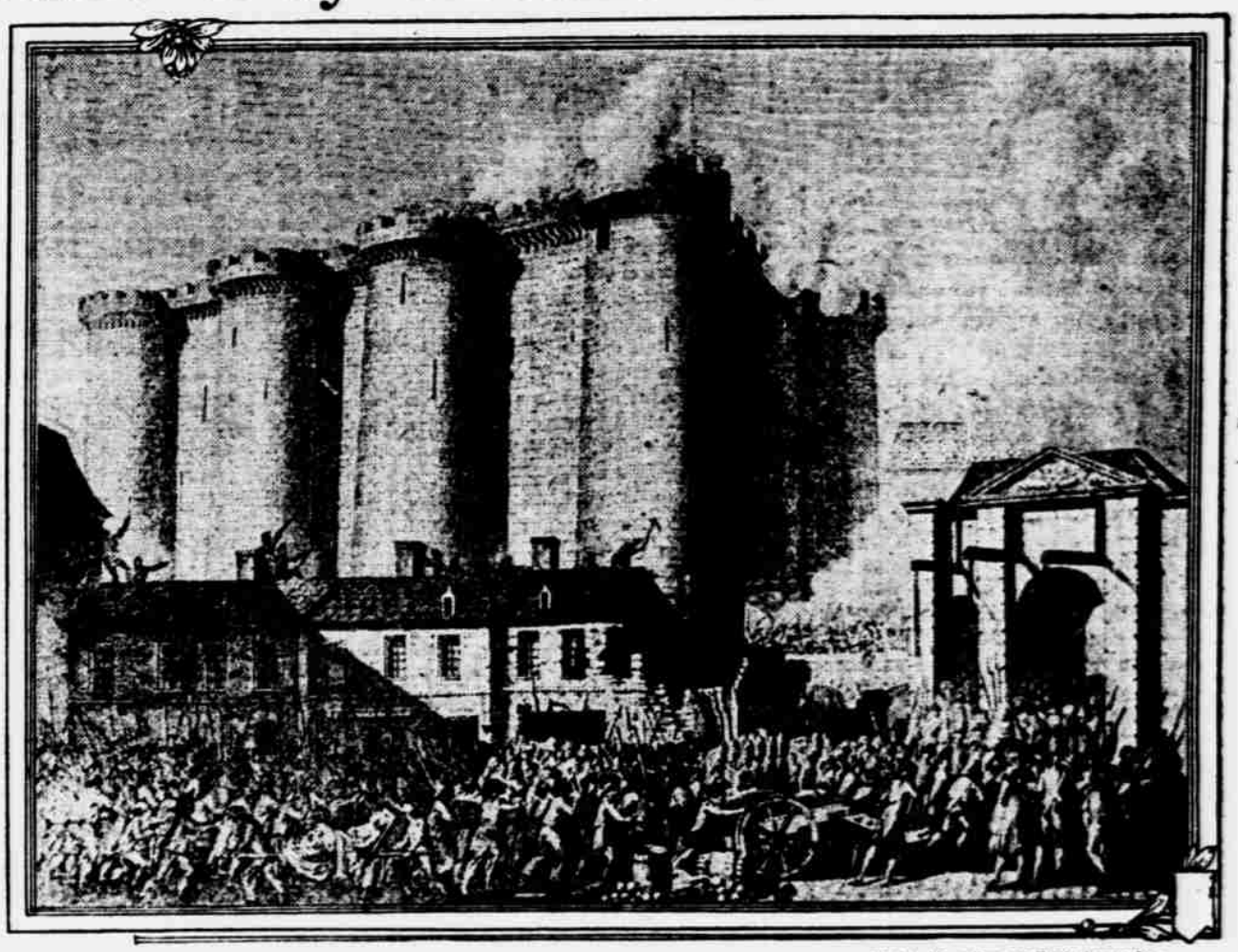

Photo by a Sun staff photographer.

"Fall of the Bastille," from an old print in the New York Public Library.

Edifice a Sign of Divine Right.

The traditions of the American Colonies and those of France differed so widely that to sense the true meaning of the Bastille it is necessary to trace the origin of that gloomy pile in the Faubourg St. Antoine. For centuries the edifice was the sign of the divine right of kings. Before the storm of the French Revolution broke there were fifty such prisons in France, for bastille signifies merely a fortified building. As the years went by so infamous became that one which stood on the banks of the Seine and was usually known as the Castle of Paris that it took unto itself the all embracing title of "The Bastille."

Like the institution of monarchy, of which it was the symbol, the structure was the development of centuries. The original edifice consisted of a pair of towers, and was a part of the stone barrier against the mediæval Huns. Charles V. about 1369 commissioned Hugues Aubriot, then provost of Paris, to enlarge the old fortification. Aubriot, having in mind the extension of the feudal power, made it both fortress and jail.

Various additions were made by the kings of France. As a fort it was considered impregnable, as the main walls at their base were forty feet thick, and beneath the battlements, one hundred feet above the pavement, the light struggled into the cells through narrow windows piercing nine feet of solid masonry. Cannon were set in the deep embrasures, and there were portholes from which archers and crossbowmen once sped the shafts of death.

To the peasantry and the common people the Bastille was all that was formidable and forbidding. A grim and mysterious stronghold, it earned year by year its evil name.

Spared Neither High Nor Low.

Kings with power of life and death over their subjects used it as the instrument with which to punish all who opposed them. They spared neither the high nor the low. In the days of absolutism the monarch could commit prisoners to the Bastille without any other process of law than a warrant which became known as a lettre de cachet.

This document, bearing the royal seal, was often in blank. Many lettres de cachet were obtained by unprincipled persons who either used them to punish their enemies or sold them to those who had sinister ends in view. The monstrous abuses which grew out of this practice were a blot on European history.

Courtiers, charlatans and courtesans found a way to sate their grudges. The life or the liberty of no man in all the kingdom was secure. Even in the eighteenth century notable personages might be thrown into prison because some relative coveted their estates. In the reign of Louis XV. 150,000 lettres de cachet were issued. His successor, Louis XVI., credited with being an amiable ruler, sent forth 14,500 on their missions of oppression.

It might well have been written over the entrance of the Bastille, "He who enters here, leaves hope behind." The place realized the darkest visions of Dante's Inferno. Separated from the streets of the city by a moat 125 feet wide and 25 feet deep, and accessible only by a drawbridge, it was like an Isle of the Dead.

In its noisome dungeons abominable cruelties were visited upon unfortunate prisoners, who were condemned to the rack and the boot and the wheel, or chained to pillars and flogged. There were circular cells with conical tops, in which the inmates could neither stand erect, nor sit, nor lie.

The roll of the sufferers of the Bastille is a long one. Various degrees of punishment were meted out to the prisoners, according to the whims of the sovereign. Some of them, like the Man with the Iron Mask, for a time a prisoner in the Bastille, were treated with consideration. They had bounteous meals, and were assigned to rooms in which there was a fair amount of light, and were even permitted to walk in the garden.

Lost All Touch With World.

They had scant enjoyment, however, for they never knew when they would be doomed to the fate of their less favored fellows. Men lived fifty and even sixty years in the Bastille, until they lost all connection with the world beyond the moat.

In that world toward the close of the eighteenth century mighty changes came to pass. The line of the Louis had so impoverished the nation that the national credit was imperilled. When Louis XVI. came to the throne a debt of $800,000,000 had been piled up, and it continued to pyramid. The common people had been footing the bill, and now came the proposal, strange in those days, that the nobles and the clergy, the privileged classes, should share the burden with the Third Estate.

It was a day of questioning and hearkening and soul searching. The words of Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot were sinking deep into the national consciousness. Hence assemblies to talk over these proposals.

In vain were the prisons filled with agitators and the Voltaires sent into exile. The storm was gathering. If the monarchy was to be sustained in its extravagance and feudalism to be upheld the mailed fist must do its work. But there was more to deal with than murmuring serfs and a handful of encyclopædists. The soldiers of France, who were expected to uphold the old regime, showed that they were unwilling to kill their fathers and brothers like dogs.

The people of Paris ransacked their city until they found arms or the material for making pikes. The time had come when the rights of men should prevail, and men who are starving under tyranny are easily recruited. As the forces of the new order grew they thought with one accord of the hated symbol of that galling oppression which was the cause of all their suffering. The cry "To the Bastille!" rose from a hundred thousand throats.

Men and women armed with weapons as effective as popguns would be against a dreadnought moved against the ancient stronghold. Bullets pattered and flattened against the massive walls. The defence was only half hearted, and the French guards on the battlements were soon waving flags of truce. A force greater than all the munitions ever made was at work—a public sentiment which had become a resistless torrent. Delaunay, the governor of the Bastille, trembled before it and surrendered. Down came the creaking drawbridge and across it rushed the infuriated citizenry. The tide flowed in and out of the dim corridors and searched out the narrow cells.

Feudal Germany Blocked Road.

As soon as there was the semblance of government arrangements were made for removing the Bastille. The work took the contractor nearly a year, although he employed a large force. There was a thriving business in its relics, for hundreds of the blocks of stone were carved into models of the prison and sold as mementoes. Locks and bolts were distributed all over the world as souvenirs.

Although the demolition of the Bastille itself proceeded, the thing for which it stood was not so easily swept aside. Feudal Germany and Austria blocked the road to liberty. We of this day, with the perspective of a century and more of history and belonging to a nation which is even now in arms against the Powers which sought to foist the yoke of serfdom once more upon the people of France, may see more clearly than even the able publicists of that period that the excesses of the French Revolution grew out of desperation.

The Huns, as now, were spinning the webs of intrigue. The Teuton, then as now, living still in the Middle Ages, domineering, mean and sordid, was determined that France should return to slavery. Louis XVI., under the influence of his beautiful wife, Marie Antoinette, was dominated by Austria. His court was filled with German spies and Prussian emissaries.

When he found that he could not conquer his people with French artillery he pretended to accede to their demands and waited for the help of the German war lords. Escaping from Paris, he had got within a few miles of the border before he was intercepted at Varennes. It was his intent to get Germany to send her armies to compel his subjects to accept his feudal rule.

Nations become accustomed to changes of government slowly when they have been ground down under the iron heel of despotism. Feckless and blind as was their king, the people of France felt that in some way he was their father and protector and that it would be a calamity if he should turn his face from them. In the months which followed when these children of the new order, knowing far less how to govern themselves than Louis and Marie Antoinette knew how to rule wisely over them, found their country invaded by Austrians and Prussians they gave way to their rage.

Might Even Have Saved Head.

They had been willing to retain even so poor a king as a constitutional ruler, and he had already put upon his head the red cap. Had he been firm enough of purpose to resist the intrigues of the Central Powers he might still have saved his face—and his head.

Those were days when Teuton tyranny was everywhere spreading its nets and snares. George I. of England was Elector of Hanover, speaking German on the British throne and knowing no English, addressing his Ministers in dubious Latin. George II. could talk lamely in the tongue of the people whom he professed to govern. George III. was more German if possible than his predecessors. They had realized that Great Britain had a constitutional government and left affairs largely to the Ministers. He, an exemplar of a Middle Age outlook, took the advice of his German mother, "George, be a king."

His obstinacy lost to Great Britain her American colonies. A German, he gave aid and comfort to France in seeking to make her yield to the demands of her Bourbon king. His kinsman, the Duke of Brunswick, leading Austria and Prussian armies, invaded France and served notice upon her National Guard that they were liable to the death of traitors.

In their exasperation the citizens of an impoverished nation then guillotined the king who was taking no steps to meet the foreign foe and was waiting the oncome of the Hun to subject them again to Bourbon tyranny. Hence the Commune and the Reign of Terror and those dark hours in which a nation in the throes was endeavoring to adjust itself to the problems which followed the overthrow of the Bastille.

France came up out of much tribulation into a republican form of government. She was enjoying peace and plenty when the Hun again crossed her borders to impose upon her a yoke which is the same as that for which stood the dark stronghold on the Seine long since destroyed.

In days like these the American people are asked to respond by observing the 14th of July as though it were their own Independence Day. The committee on the Allied Tribute to France has therefore issued its appeal for a simultaneous celebration of Bastille Day to-day throughout the United States, so that the land of Lafayette may know that every citizen on this side of the water is in sympathy with our friend and ally of old.